

# Drama: A Way to Teach Spoken English

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In this report, I will be discussing the five plays, all full productions, I have directed at Seisen Women's Junior College and the results of a questionnaire I gave the students who participated in this year's "Sotsu-ken" (Graduation Thesis) drama seminar. "Drama" refers to the performance of a play on a stage in front of an audience with costumes, make-up, lights, and sound effects, and to the preparation thereof, not to classroom drama techniques for English conversation.

## Introduction

Of the many textbooks and methods I have used in teaching spoken English over the years I have been in Japan, none have had as many loose ends or been as time-consuming as drama, but none have been as memorable or rewarding in terms of visible student achievement and a feeling of unity. Having directed five plays, I now feel that I am ready to reflect on the experience of doing drama with students of English-as-a-Second-Language at the college level. I would also like to encourage other teachers who have even the slightest inclination to try teaching spoken English through drama.

The drama method has three major strengths. The first and most important of these is that the goal of the course is clear. The students know that on a certain date at a certain time they will give a performance of a certain play. The second strength is that there is no need to wonder what to talk about. The main topic is the play itself and the plans for its performance. The third strength is that a drama seminar is self-motivating and self-supportive. The students know that they must work together to get the play done properly and on time. Since they will be the ones on stage with all eyes watching them, they are highly motivated to do the very best they possibly can.

When considering whether or not to use the drama method, some language teachers will undoubtedly be worried about not having had proper training in the theater arts. However, if the emphasis is on teaching spoken English, then energy, organizational skills, and an interest in drama will suffice. This is certainly true in my own case. I have always loved the excitement and energy of live theater. I have fond

memories as a child of being taken to performances by the Starlight Opera Company of San Diego, California, which did a series of outdoor musicals every summer in Balboa Park. When I was older, I went to plays at the Old Globe Theater, also in Balboa Park, which had a Shakespeare Festival every summer, and did a variety of plays during the rest of the year. The list of plays I have seen is rather long, but the list of plays I have actually worked on is short. I made my last, forgettable, appearance on the stage in a junior high school play, and I worked a bit around that time at the Old Globe Theater... as an usher. In college I really became interested in drama. As an undergraduate literature major I tended to choose classes in which we read plays, by authors such as Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Brecht, and I worked backstage on a play written by one of my professors. After graduation, shortly before coming to Japan, I worked, again backstage, on two musicals with the Starlight Opera Company.

After I began teaching English in Japan I realized how much the classroom resembled a theater. The language teacher is giving a (usually) solo performance on a stage in front of an audience of students. Teachers must consider their costumes and their lines, and they must be sensitive to the reviews their classes get in order to be successful. In language teaching, gestures and facial expressions must be exaggerated and words must be enunciated clearly to get meaning across to non-native speakers, just as they must be on the stage. Depending on the topic, the teacher may have to be anything from a stand-up comedian to a tragedian.

I decided to try using drama to teach spoken English after reading Via's book, *English in Three Acts*, in graduate school. It is based on his years in the theater world and his experience of teaching spoken English through drama in Japan, and contains a gold mine of information on all aspects of drama for the language teacher. I have tried his classroom drama techniques with some very large groups of about sixty students each. These worked as well as any method could with such a large class, but classroom drama pales in comparison with a full production of a play done by a drama seminar. The following is a list of the plays I have directed at Seisen. Several of these plays were listed in *English in Three Acts*.

1. *I Remember Mama* by John van Druten. A three-act drama about a family of Norwegian immigrants in San Francisco around the turn of the century. Cast of six men and ten women, plus extras. ("Sotsu-ken" drama seminar—ten students)
2. *Women Must Work* by Mary Orr. A one-act mystery story set in an exclusive

couturier shop in New York City in the early 1960's. Cast of eleven women, plus extras. (First year elective course – twenty-eight students)

3. *Interview* by Jean-Claude Van Itallie. A one-act avant-garde play made up of a series of scenes from modern American urban life. Cast of four men and four women. (“Sotsu-ken” drama seminar – eight students)
4. *The Gift of the Magi* by O. Henry (dramatized by Anne Coulter Martens). A one-act play about a poor young couple's first Christmas together. Cast of one man and six women. (“Sotsu-ken” drama seminar – seven students)
5. *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White (dramatized by Joseph Robinette). A sophisticated two-act children's play about a clever spider who saves the life of a cute, little pig. Cast of four men, three women, and seven animals, plus extras. (“Sotsu-ken” drama seminar – fourteen students)

### Obtaining and Choosing a Play

Before you can choose a play, you must have plays to choose from. This can be a problem for a foreign language teacher in Japan. The first year I decided to do a play, I had only the catalogs of Japanese publishers of English-language textbooks, which contain a very limited selection of plays. I ordered and read them all and selected *I Remember Mama*. The story was the main consideration here, for it was a long play and had a large cast of characters. The next year, I ordered a number of the short plays listed in the “Epilogue” of *English in Three Acts*. My order was placed through the school, which then sent it to a large bookstore in Tokyo. The plays drifted in a few at a time over a period of many months. I realized that I could not rely on getting the plays I wanted when I wanted them, so I wrote to a high school teacher friend in the USA, who sent me catalogs from the four play publishing companies listed in the bibliography. These companies have sent me materials by air mail on request and also offer sound effects tapes, posters, and other drama-related materials. Ordering directly from these publishers in the USA has been by far the best way of obtaining plays.

Now, assuming you already have your catalogs in hand, how do you choose the best play for the group of students you are working with? Via suggests that a director should, “choose a play that (1) will be interesting to you and the students, (2) has modern language (3) shows today's culture and behavior, and (4) is easy to cast”

(Via, p. 41).

The importance of the first of Via's four criteria for choosing a play, that it be interesting to both the director and the students, cannot be overemphasized. The director must be very enthusiastic about the play itself from the beginning. This enthusiasm must sell the play to the students who doubt its worth (there are always a few of these) and must be capable of keeping up the morale of the cast until the final performance.

The second point, that the play have modern language, is vital for students of English-as-a-Second-Language. They spend a great deal of time and effort on memorizing their lines. They should therefore be learning potentially useful language. Archaic language, such as that in the plays of Shakespeare, however beautiful, would not come into this category. Plays written in a heavy dialect are also not suitable for students of English-as-a-Second-Language.

The third point, that the play show modern culture and behavior, is partly for the convenience of the director. As an American, I feel most comfortable working with plays set in the USA because I can be confident about the explanations I give the students on pronunciation, intonation, gestures, and costuming. However, I would not discard a play I found especially interesting just because it was not set in the middle class America of the latter 20th century that I am most familiar with. I would research the background as well as I could.

The fourth point was being able to cast the play. At Seisen Women's Junior College, I am naturally working with all-female casts. Because of this I avoid plays with heavy love scenes, dialog laden with four-letter words, and plays which require predominantly male casts. Very few plays are written for casts of young women, though. (*Women Must Work*, with its cast of young working women, was an exception.) Most call for mixed casts of people of all ages, and even animals! In Japan, however, with its tradition of all-male casts in kabuki and all-female casts in the Takarazuka Revue playing characters of both sexes, there have always been students who have wanted to play the non-female roles, and the audiences have always been willing to suspend disbelief.

Deciding what to do about the extras can be as great a problem as casting the main characters. Since the main value of the drama seminar is to help the students improve their spoken English, every member of the seminar should be given a substantial speaking part in the play. The number of characters in *I Remember Mama* was so large that almost every member of the cast had to play a second minor role in addition to her major one, and a few other first and second year students had to

be called upon to play characters that had no lines at all. In recent years I have had more choice in plays, so it has not been necessary for students to play multiple roles. In *Women Must Work* there were many more students in the class than there were speaking parts in the play, so the students who were assigned backstage jobs were given the chance to appear on stage as extras. This year in *Charlotte's Web*, the teachers in the English Department were the "special guest stars" who played the cameo roles.

I would like to add three more points that I have found must be considered when choosing a play for production at Seisen: (1) it must not be too long, (2) the story must not be too abstract, and (3) it must not require staging that is technically too difficult.

The first play I did, *I Remember Mama*, was a three-act play with a running time of over two hours. The students loved the story and were excited and warm under the stage lights that very cold day in February when the play was performed, but the poor audience nearly froze in the barely heated room. After that experience, I realized that an hour is the optimum length for a play at the junior college level. It is neither too taxing for the students to memorize nor for an audience of non-native speakers to sit through. The running time of this year's two-act play, *Charlotte's Web*, was on the long side, about one and a half hours, but I went ahead with it because the book was a childhood favorite of mine, and I needed a play for a cast of fourteen.

In selecting a play in English to be performed by Japanese students the director must keep in mind the fact that the audience will also be primarily Japanese. After months of careful reading and rehearsing, the members of the cast will understand the play quite well, but the audience will see and hear it only once at the final performance. The actors are performing for the audience, and they need to feel a reaction. A dull, dead silence from the audience at a moment of high comedy or drama in a play is the worst thing that can happen. It means that THE AUDIENCE DID NOT UNDERSTAND. For this reason, plays with a single story line, whether they be family dramas, such as *I Remember Mama*, mysteries, such as *Women Must Work*, or fantasies, such as *Charlotte's Web*, have been the most successful. Stories that are familiar to the audience, such as *The Gift of the Magi*, which many students had read in their English-language textbooks in junior or senior high school, are also highly recommended because it is easier for everyone to understand a play based on a story they already know. *Interview*, on the other hand, with its series of rather stylized scenes, was a creative challenge for the cast, but the audience did not seem

to know quite what to make of make of it. I chose the play because it was available, it called for exactly the number of students in the drama seminar that year, and it had been highly recommended for Japanese students in Via's book (p. 157), but I do not think I will choose that sort of abstract play for Seisen students again.

The actual staging of a play, the making or borrowing of costumes, scenery, and props, and the coordination of lighting, sound effects, and music is what sets "real" drama apart from classroom drama. This is the part that can become extremely troublesome, especially if the director does not give careful thought to the budget available for drama, the school facilities, and the technical requirements of the play before making a final decision.

### First or Second Year Students?

Of the five plays I have directed, four (*I Remember Mama*, *Interview*, *The Gift of the Magi*, and *Charlotte's Web*) were done with second year "Sotsu-ken" students and one (*Women Must Work*) with first year students as an elective class. Most of the major problems I have had with drama were with that one class of first year students. First of all, the group was much too large. All of the students wanted to be on the stage, but it was impossible to find a short play with speaking parts for all twenty-eight of the students in the class. I chose *Women Must Work*, which had speaking parts for eleven, because it called for a large number of extras, and everyone would be able to appear on stage at some time in the play.

Additional problems in working with first year students were that they were not yet accustomed to school life at Seisen, they did not know each other very well, and they were not able to judge how busy they would be at the Seisen Festival in the autumn, when the play was scheduled to be performed. Also, I did not know the first year students well enough by the summer vacation, when I had to make major decisions on casting. After I got to know the students better, I regretted some of my choices, but found that it was impossible to change them.

The first year elective class had to be divided into two groups: "actresses" and "backstage crew". During most of the class time I had to focus my attention on the actresses to help them with pronunciation and to block the play. The technical aspects of our plays were kept as simple as possible, so the backstage crew had very little to do until the last few rehearsals and were bored a lot of the time. In order to involve more of the first year students in class activities, I made two cast lists: one of regulars and one of alternates. The alternates were supposed to be practicing together during class time, too, but they did not seriously believe that they would actually

have a chance to perform, and they did not practice very hard. As it happened, about a week before the final performance, one of the leads in *Women Must Work*, who was also extremely busy with other jobs preparing for the Seisen Festival, went into the hospital with a twisted intestine, probably due to stress, and the alternate had to take over her role on very short notice.

With the first year students, I also appointed a student director in order to give more students jobs. This turned out to be a mistake, because I found out later that the cast members sometimes resented being given orders by another student, though they did not mind being given orders by me. Unfortunately, some of the students in this group did not end up on friendly terms with each other. I now tell the students that I am the director and that they are all my assistant directors. I expect them all to help me make decisions and express their opinions on the plans for the play.

It was also unfortunate that the gymnasium, with the stage where our play was to be performed, was under construction during the first semester of the year we were working on *Women Must Work*. There was only one other small stage in the school, but other groups had priority in using it, so our group was assigned a regular classroom. The actresses had very little opportunity to practice on a stage before the final performance. The backstage crew members, who did not have access to the new stage until shortly before the final performance was scheduled to be held, were not able to make effective plans for the lighting, set design, and sound effects, or to practice using the equipment. The timing of the construction could not be helped, but the final performance would have gone more smoothly if the first year students had been more willing to work together on the play outside of class time.

There have also been problems in working with the second year students, but they have not been as serious. All in all, a play is an intense and exhausting project that seems more suited to second year students.

### From Play Selection to Final Performance

In the following section, the requirements and schedule for the drama seminar at Seisen will be described. The basic "Sotsu-ken" requirement is that the students meet at least eight times during the year with their "Sotsu-ken" adviser. This year I met with the students of the drama seminar forty-five times from the start of the school year in April to the dress rehearsal in October, including four times during the summer vacation and almost every day during the last month before the performance. In addition to this there was the performance itself at the Seisen Festival and one final meeting where we informally discussed the performance, the students turned in their

questionnaires, and we watched part of the video of the final performance.

Preparing for a drama is a drama in itself. The four phases in the preparation of a play are roughly as follows:

1. March.....Choose the play and order the books.
2. April – May.....Read the play with the students and discuss it.  
Practice pronunciation.  
Make a translation of the play.  
Make a tape recording.
3. June – July .....Cast the play.  
Begin rehearsing on the stage.  
Decide on a name for the group.  
Decide on the backstage jobs each cast member will be responsible for.
4. September – October .....Rehearsals almost every day.  
Recruit backstage staff and extras.  
Final performance at the Seisen Festival.

I will now discuss these four phases in greater detail.

#### 1. March

At Seisen, the students make a decision on their general “Sotsu-ken” topic at the end of their first year and are assigned an adviser. I have one meeting with the members of the new group at which I explain the general schedule of the seminar and ask them for any opinions they have on the type of play we should do. I begin to go through the play catalogs of the publishing companies listed in the bibliography. I order all of the plays that fit the criteria described in the introduction by air mail and read them as soon as they arrive. After deciding on one, I order books for the students by air mail.

#### 2. April – May

The first thing we do after the new school year begins is to watch the video of the previous year’s performance, so the new group can see that it is possible for a play to be done. I introduce them to the play I have chosen for their group and give them as much background information on the story and the author as possible. As



soon as the books arrive, we begin to read the play. Parts are assigned for each day's reading only and are changed each time we meet so that no one will form an attachment to a particular role too early on. I explain things in the play the students do not understand, and we summarize each section as we read it. We read as much as we can each day. When we finish reading the play, we begin again at the beginning. It takes several readings for the students to understand the basic story and begin to see the characters.

We spend the first part of each lesson at the beginning of the first semester doing pronunciation exercises on the sounds the students have the most trouble with, /th/, /l/ and /r/, and /b/, /f/, and /v/, and loudness exercises to teach them to project their voices (Eisenson, 1979). During the reading of the play I am constantly correcting pronunciation errors. I also remind the students that they will have only one chance to say their lines at the final performance. Their voices must be loud and their pronunciation must be clear, or the audience will not understand what they say.

Making a translation of the play was the idea of the first "Sotsu-ken" group, who felt they needed one for *I Remember Mama* and were not able to find a published one in Japanese. They decided to make one themselves, and all subsequent groups have wanted to do the same thing. After the first reading of the play, I divide it up so that each student has an equal number of pages to translate at home. When difficulties arise, I either try to help the students individually, or we discuss difficulties as a group during our reading sessions. After all students have finished their translations, I make copies for all members of the group. Our translation may be rough in parts, but I have noticed that the students do refer to it during the rehearsals. My original idea was that the drama seminar would be conducted entirely in English, so no translation would be necessary. However, if the translation helps the students understand the play and choose the parts they want to do, and if the students want to do it, I cannot object.

Watching a performance of the play we are studying, either live or on film, is another way to help the students understand the story. The first "Sotsu-ken" group was very lucky to hear about a professional stage production of *I Remember Mama* (with Kaoru Yachigusa in the title role) in Japanese in Tokyo during the months we were practicing. Most of the members of the cast were able to go to Tokyo to see this, and they came back, of course, with a very clear idea of what they needed to do. The chances of such a performance coinciding with our "Sotsu-ken" plays in the future is slight, but videos of famous plays that have been made into movies may be available.

We were able to get a cassette tape recording of *I Remember Mama*. I found it useful because there was an unfamiliar song in the play that one of the characters had to sing; the students found it useful for studying pronunciation and intonation at home. Recordings have not been available for any of the other plays, so my colleague and I have recorded the plays ourselves for the students.

### 3. June — July

Casting the play is the director's most difficult job during the year. It is the first major step towards the reality of the final performance. It is not necessarily true that everyone wants to be the star, but generally there are "popular" and "unpopular" characters. Once the casting is done, it is very difficult to make changes. In order to build a strong group that works well together and ends the play with friendly feelings toward each other, I have learned to take my time and cast the play carefully. Over the years, I have come up with the following system. First, after we have read the play a couple of times and everyone has a general idea of what the play is about and what the characters are like, I give everyone a list of the characters and ask them to number the characters in order of preference, with #1 being the part they would most like to play. They may also indicate the characters they absolutely do not want to play at this time. They have to write their own names on this paper so that I will not miscast a character who must be either short or tall. I also ask the students what they will be involved in at the Seisen Festival besides the drama, so that students who are too busy will not be given the bigger parts. After a week or so, I give them another list of the characters and ask them how they would cast the play if they were directing it. This is done anonymously. The students fill in the entire cast list, with their own names beside the character they most want to play.

Putting together the data from these two surveys, I come up with several possible casts. (In the case of *Charlotte's Web* there were four.) I try to give everyone a part as high as possible on her list of preferences. I give the students copies of these lists. They are given time to discuss the lists, and then we vote by secret ballot. We usually have to vote several times before a final decision is reached. The students sometimes have creative ideas for compromises, for example, the year we did *The Gift of the Magi*, there were seven students in the cast and seven characters in the play, though not all had an equal number of lines. The students suggested casting two students for Della, the lead, who appeared in all the scenes: one student to play Della in Scenes 1 and 2, another to play Della in Scenes 3 and 4. The two smallest parts were played by one student, with a small costume change. This spread out the burden of memorizing lines and satisfied the two girls who very much wanted to play Della.

There have been no hard feelings with this method because the students feel that they have had a hand in the casting of their play.

Once we have chosen the cast, we start rehearsing on the stage. This year, especially, because of the timing of teaching practice, job interviews, and club activities, it was difficult to get everyone together at the same time. In fact, we only had the entire cast present for the dress rehearsal and the final performance! Trying to rehearse without the entire cast can be very trying. This year, in the earlier stages, I had students who were not in the scene fill in for the missing actors. This went very slowly and created total chaos, as the substitutes had difficulty following other students' lines in the script and did not know where to walk or what to do. We gave that up, and I began to read the lines for the missing students myself from my position out in front. The students on the stage just pretended they were shaking hands, etc. with the missing actors, which lessened the chaos. It was a bit hard on my voice when a lot of members of the cast were absent, so we concentrated on rehearsing only those scenes in which the students who were present were involved.

Having a name for our group gives the students a group identity and is useful for posters and other forms of advertising for the play, but choosing a name takes time. I tell the students to start thinking about it early in the semester, and I periodically ask them if they have any ideas, making notes of any suggestions. It is not necessary to decide on a name until the Seisen Festival pamphlet goes to press in the early summer. Usually we decide on a name by consensus, when everyone reacts favorably to one suggested during our brainstorming sessions. All of the names used so far have had a special meaning for the students. This is the list:

1. "The Pink Radish Players" — This is a play on the phrase "daikon yakusha", which means "a poor actor" in Japanese.
2. "Theater 28+1" — There were twenty-eight students in the class, plus one teacher.
3. "Bee Theater" — There were eight students in the drama seminar. "Hachi", the Japanese word for "eight", is homonymous with "hachi", the Japanese word for "bee".
4. "Big Dipper Theater" — There are seven stars in the Big Dipper, and there were seven members in the cast, all stars, of course.

5. "Double Rainbow Theater"—The rainbow was used as a theme decoration at this year's Seisen Festival.

In addition to their roles on the stage, the members of the cast must also plan the technical aspects of the play. These include making a plan for the set, finding or making the furniture and props needed on the stage, planning the lighting, sound effects, and music, and making posters and pamphlets for the play. The money we receive from the school for the play is spent on things we need for the stage. We try to keep the set and technical effects as simple as possible.

It is absolutely necessary that the students know the play well and that the casting and backstage jobs be decided before the summer vacation. It is not necessary for the students to have their lines memorized by this time, however. As soon as the casting has been done, I tell the students to write their own lines on "word cards" (packs of small blank cards held together by a metal or plastic ring). Writing the lines helps to reinforce them, and seeing the number of cards they need lets them know exactly how much they have to memorize. As soon as they are ready, I encourage them to hold their cards during the stage rehearsals, rather than their scripts. It forces them to listen more carefully to the other actors in their scenes and to learn the whole play, not just their own lines. The cards are small enough to be held in the palm of the hand and can be carried around easily at all times for individual practice in odd moments. Via (p. 47) warns against students reading only their own lines, but I have found that students become very flustered during rehearsals when they keep getting corrected for the same mistake. They like to be able to practice in private, and their fluency improves. I tell the students that they may carry their cards with them on stage during the final performance if they wish, but over the years only a couple of students have felt the need to do so. We try to organize a few rehearsals at the end of the summer vacation before the new semester starts to get the students back to thinking about the play. The word cards need to be ready by this time.

#### 4. September — October

After the new semester begins, it is best to schedule rehearsal time almost every day. In fact, it is impossible to get all the members of the cast together this often, but as many as possible should get together to practice. I continue to correct pronunciation errors and try to get them to speak as loudly as possible.

The students are ready to start defining their characters by this time. In the past I have had the students write reports about the past, present, and future of the char-

acter they are playing. This year we only discussed this informally during the rehearsals. The students are responsible for their own make-up and costume for the play. I encourage them to bring pieces of their costume to wear during rehearsals as soon as they can. Discussing their character and wearing a costume help them make the transition from student to actress.

Although the members of the cast plan the technical aspects, it is sometimes physically impossible for them to be doing the backstage jobs during the final performance. For these jobs, it has been most successful to recruit second year students who are friends of the members of the cast. They are required to come only to the last few practices, the dress rehearsal, and the final performance. In the early years, I recruited first year students, thinking that it might encourage them to join the drama seminar the following year. None of them did so, however, and because they did not know the second year students well, they were shy about coming to rehearsals. They did not get enough practice doing their jobs, and they ended up making mistakes during the final performance, such as putting a sound effects tape in the machine backwards.

The day of the performance is always a memorable one for everyone connected with the play. Everyone is tense with excitement. I check the stage to see that everything is in place, check the costumes, and then I leave the students on their own. During the play, my only job is to prompt students who go blank, but this rarely happens. The students are always concentrating so heavily on remembering their lines during rehearsals that they hardly do any acting, but at the final performance, they always surprise me with their sensitive portrayals of their characters. At the curtain call, there is usually not a dry eye in the cast as we all cry tears of joy and relief. It is a day never to be forgotten.

### The Results of the Questionnaire

The first part of the questionnaire was concerned with the background of the students in the drama seminar and their reasons for choosing drama.

1. Had you ever done drama before doing *Charlotte's Web*? When? In what language?

Eleven of the fourteen students in the group had done drama at some time in their school career, but for eight of these students the experience had been in kindergarten or elementary school. One student had done some in junior high.

Only two students in the seminar had done drama in high school. None of the students had ever done drama in a foreign language.

2. Did you watch the English Drama at the Seisen Festival when you were a first year student?

Only two of the students in the seminar answered "Yes".

3. Have you ever been to a foreign country? Did your experience influence your decision to take drama?

Thirteen of the students had been abroad, almost all on homestay programs. The one student who had not been abroad made a note that she was planning on going to the USA during the coming spring vacation. Eleven of the students who had been abroad said that their experience had influenced their decision to take drama.

4. Why did you join the English drama "Sotsu-ken" group this year?

The students had a variety of reasons, of course, and sometimes more than one. The most common reason was to improve their spoken English (eight students). Seven students mentioned being interested in drama; this included both doing drama and watching plays or movies. One student mentioned preferring active things to passive, and one very frank student said that in addition to wanting to speak English, she wanted to finish her "Sotsu-ken" early. (After the performance at the Seisen Festival in October, the drama students had only their questionnaire to turn in, while students in other "Sotsu-ken" groups are often quite busy during the winter vacation.)

5. How did your expectations compare with the reality of doing English drama?

Half of the students in the group answered that it was more difficult than they had imagined it would be.

The next part of the questionnaire dealt with the students' opinions of various things we did in the drama seminar:

6. What did you think of the following things? a) making a Japanese translation of the play, b) writing your own lines on word cards, c) having a tape recording of the play, and d) choosing a name for our group.

a) Ten of the students in the group this year considered making the Japanese translation of the play to be “very useful”; the other four considered it “slightly useful”.

b) Six students rated the word cards as “very useful”, five students rated them as “slightly useful”, and three students thought they were “not necessary”.

c) Nine students thought the recording was “very useful”, and four students found it “slightly useful”.

d) The students this year unanimously agreed that choosing a group name was “a good idea”.

Next, I wanted to know how they practiced for the play and whether or not they thought they were benefiting from drama.

7. How did you practice outside of scheduled rehearsals? How much?

Reading their scripts or listening to the tape at home were the most common, but no one seemed to have any idea how much time they had spent. Only one student admitted to practicing only during scheduled rehearsals.

8. Do you think that your own English has improved because of drama? In what way? Pronunciation? Fluency? Vocabulary? Confidence?

All fourteen of the students thought that their own English had improved because of the drama. Pronunciation (listed by thirteen students) was the most frequently mentioned specific area of improvement.

From this questionnaire, I can see that the students view the drama seminar as a way to improve their spoken English, and that the experience of trips abroad gives them the confidence to try drama in a foreign language. I need to continue to stress

the amount of time and energy the drama seminar will take and the need for good pronunciation and a loud, clear voice from the first day we meet. I will continue having the students make a translation of the play and a name for the group. I will also suggest that the students use the tape recording and word cards when practicing, but I will not insist on it, because students have individual learning styles.

### Conclusion

In the ideal drama seminar, I would wish to work with fewer than ten second year students on a one-act play. The students would all have a strong interest in drama and would be willing to put in as much time and effort as was necessary, and then some, to produce a polished performance at the Seisen Festival. All of the members of the cast would attend all of the scheduled meetings. We would have time to do more of the drama warm-up exercises found in *English in Three Acts*, or any of the other books on drama and second language teaching, before we began rehearsing our play on the stage. We would have quiet, uninterrupted practices in the room where the final performance would be held, with stage, curtains, lights, and other technical facilities. We would have two regularly scheduled class periods a week for drama until the Seisen Festival, plus rehearsals in free periods as needed during the last month.

The reality is that students are absent from rehearsals, and we have to deal with technical difficulties and a lack of time and space for concentrated work. The multitude of things that can go wrong in a drama are likely to fray the nerves of even the calmest. It is at the most disorganized of times that I must remind myself what my goals for the drama seminar are. The main one is to give the students an experience in living colloquial English: to help them improve their pronunciation and fluency and increase their vocabulary. The second one is to give the students a chance to work together and create something as a group: to give them the satisfaction of having completed a big job and leave them with a lasting memory of their school days. The enjoyment the audience gets out of a performance is a bonus.

At the beginning of the school year, I have total control over what happens in the drama seminar, but, as the months go by, this decreases. I delegate more and more responsibility to the students themselves. I assign them roles in the play and backstage jobs to plan. Gradually my role as teacher-director diminishes, until it reaches nearly zero at the final performance, when I am only a member of the audience. The students gradually begin to realize that the outcome of the final performance totally depends on their own efforts. I know that the desire to do well in front



of the audience at the final performance will motivate the students to do their very best, therefore, I find that I have boundless patience with them even when they are not as organized as I want them to be.

Drama may be troublesome and time-consuming, but the satisfaction it gives is so great that as each play finishes I start looking forward to doing the next one. I truly enjoy the working relationship I have with the students during the months of rehearsals. I enjoy helping them struggle to understand an unfamiliar play and to plan a performance. Most of all I enjoy the heights they reach when they bring their characters to life on the stage. To paraphrase a line from the last scene of *Charlotte's Web*, "Drama students, I will never, ever forget you."

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